"MORE REAL AND LESS FACTUAL:" TEACHER DECISION-MAKING ABOUT PLACE-BASED TOPICS IN RURAL SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

In an age of accountability and tenuous school funding, rural schools are particularly challenged to maintain the institution, contribute to the wider community, and imbue students with local pride. One promising instructional approach is place-based education, students studying the setting in which they live and learn. Participants in this qualitative study were 5 Kentucky teachers who covered issues of regional resource management with students. Participants recognized that curricular mandates affected their planning and deprived students of certain skills for success in school and the real world. In the results of the study, the essential nature of interaction between school and community is highlighted as an ingredient for student engagement and success. Teachers also recognized that students required a variety of instructional approaches, and that the tested core curriculum in classrooms requires a supplement of hands-on and real-world activities.

Schools face formidable challenges in an age of accountability. Shrinking state budgets may force school districts to close schools that perform poorly on state tests. Rural schools with small student populations may be especially at risk (Howley, 2003). However, Williams (2003) suggests that rural schools can generate both institutional longevity and academic success for their students by remaking themselves

> into new kinds of institutions that dissolve the boundaries between school and community, ensuring that facilities and programs serve the entire community, and holding schools and communities mutually accountable (p. 70).

In various classrooms, teachers who include an examination of their milieu in the curriculum may enhance student achievement and build a school's connection to its rural community. This research is designed to elucidate teacher decision-making in a climate of testing and standards, particularly decisions related to teaching students about local issues.

One instructional approach that has brought student success in small and rural schools is *place-based education*. Through this approach, teachers teach content about the environment and/or culture of the place in which students live. By one definition, place-based academic content includes what is unique and significant about a particular setting. Student work products address community needs and interests. And expert community experts offer assistance with the place-based work that students and teachers do in their classrooms (Sobel & Bartsch, 2004).

In rural settings, the interaction between students and their communities is important at a variety of levels. Sociologists have pointed out the edifying effects for young people that are a by-product of small-town community life. Traits of these settings – including rural citizens' shared ownership of the well-being of the community's young people – have proven repeatedly

to be rich terrain that yields adults who are creative problem-solvers and community-minded residents. Salamon (2003) wrote, “The cooperation and trust inherent to agrarian community social relationships ideally are renewed through joint acts aimed at raising youth or benefiting the town” (p. 18).

The health of the rural community and the well-being of its youth are connected. Salamon (2003) found that a community’s young people are an *indicator species* that reflects the health of a rural community. In fact, Salamon noted that a veneration of young people is a trait unique to rural settings.

Ironically, young people seem to encounter a dearth of formal opportunities to build connections with their communities. Schools in particular are a place from which examinations of the community are conspicuously absent. Teachers’ decisions to deliver content about the locality are not as routine as some researchers might suppose. The current focus on state standards reduces students’ contact with the outdoors and increases teachers’ focus on preparing students for standardized tests. Local topics are often omitted from a teacher’s taught curriculum.

Understandably, inserting content from outside the standardized curriculum (such as local topics) is not risk-free. In one rural secondary school, four teachers who had included place-based lessons in their taught curriculum acknowledged the hazards associated with teaching content that was not part of the state’s curriculum. These teachers indicated they would stop teaching local topics if students earned low scores on state tests. And while these teachers acknowledged their own personal commitment to teaching about the milieu, they indicated that transmitting local content was not exclusively the school’s responsibility. They pointed to other institutions such as museums and town libraries that could teach local topics (Thomas, 2005).

An individual teacher's influence is significant in communicating the value of the locality and its effect upon students. Through their research findings, anthropologists echo a consistent point, that teachers are not "neutral dispensers of information," but instead are "active cultural beings, suffused with orientations of the culture" (Wilcox, 1982, p. 463-464). Teachers guide students in their acquisition of priorities, including the way in which students regard their community. In his study of small high school closings and consolidations, Peshkin (1978) noted that teachers transmitted to students the norms of the rural community through their instruction.

Some critics allege that standardized testing causes a narrowing of the curriculum -- to the point of removing classroom teachers from the curriculum-selection process. Sobel and Bartsch (2004) purport that the No Child Left Behind legislation causes schools to focus only on test scores and set their curricular sights too low. Madaus (1988) said that standardized testing transfers the control of the curriculum from classrooms to the state agency that produces the test (p. 97-98). Also according to Madaus, in each setting that gives a high-stakes test, the taught curriculum eventually shifts to match the content of the test (p. 93).

Because community-focused topics rarely appear on a standards-based test, teachers must be highly intentional in deciding to teach lessons that include references to local nature and culture. Theobald (1997) wrote that building a connection between schools and communities is "*a moral endeavor*" (his emphasis) that should be approached boldly (p. 122). Regarding the instruction of local history he wrote, "With skillful pedagogical guidance, the school's place allows children to develop the intellectual flexibility needed to see history as a force in their lives rather than as an exercise in the acquisition of names and dates" (p. 138-9). Theobald purported that approaching classroom subjects in this way erases the artificiality of academic disciplines and reinforces relevance in student learning.

While state standards typically direct the attention of K-12 teachers toward broad, required concepts, Archie (2003) contended that standards have helped hone educators' ideas about what is most important for students to learn. Therefore, while state standards designate the very basics of what needs to be taught, some educators have identified additional topics, including place-based content, to extend the required curriculum.

In small schools and rural settings, research depicted place-based lessons as one factor that contributed to student success. In its 2004 report "Beating the Odds: High Performing, Small High Schools In The Rural South," The Rural School and Community Trust (a.k.a., The Rural Trust) recognized eight schools as "good rural high schools." Notably, these were each schools that served significant populations of high poverty and high minority students. Based on the findings of this report, The Rural Trust recommended that small rural high schools be given the freedom to customize their curriculum to meet student needs most effectively after teachers have taught the state's required curriculum (p. 10). The flexibility required to initiate place-based lessons at these schools was a natural fit for their size and capabilities. This study reported that place-based lessons encouraged students to recognize the relevance of local topics and to achieve deeper and global understandings about academic content.

Archie (2003) reported the results from 11 diverse schools in Florida that integrated local environmental studies as a primary theme for classwork. Research revealed renewed enthusiasm among both students and teachers about their academic work. Both groups exhibited innovation and augmented ownership of their work. Archie reported that the types of instruction that accompany local content boost the relevance that students recognize in their academic work and appeal to a variety of learning styles.

Considering ways to connect community issues to classroom content naturally raises questions about how students should encounter content in classrooms. During a recent study of the quality of science and math instruction in American classrooms, Weiss, Pasley, Smith, Banilower, and Heck (2003) pointed out that course content must be both "significant and worthwhile" (p. 40) in order to engage students. In addition, classroom instruction must provide "purposeful interaction" (p. 40-41) with course content, and should portray the academic subject as dynamic and "investigative in nature" (p. 44). Ultimately, these teacher decisions about presenting content provide a motivation for students to learn.

The challenge faced by teachers who consider local topics for their curriculum is captured in Danzer's (2001, p. 1) question, "How can we make a community interesting to itself?" What are considerations for educators who might teach about the place in which they live while preparing students to master state standards?

Methods

The purpose of this study was to illuminate decisions made by secondary school teachers to use place-based lessons in their classrooms. Each participant in the study had participated in a content academy on the campus of Morehead State University during Summer 2003. This academy was funded by the Kentucky Department of Education and had regional forest resources as its focus. Five middle- and high school teachers from four Kentucky schools participated in this study. All 5 taught courses (social studies, science, or English) assessed under the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA). These teachers had each expressed an intention to teach their students about the place in which they live.

The researcher sought to examine participants' instructional planning by conducting a series of three ethnographic interviews with each participant during 2004. The interview process emphasized specific requirements, including that the researcher sought detailed testimony from informants and gathered data in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). Most of the interviews were conducted at the teachers' school sites, although some were held on a university campus.

Interview guides dictated the themes for each interview. After the interviews were completed and transcribed, participants inspected and returned the transcripts. The researcher analyzed each participant's set of interviews according to the framework for cross-case analysis (Yin, 1994) and identified themes that emerged from the five participants' testimonies.

The purpose of cross-case analysis is "to build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details" (Yin, 1994, p. 112). As a means to assure the validity of the cross-case analysis, the researcher compared the emergent data patterns to four propositions and rival propositions he had composed prior to data analysis. Yin likened this pattern-matching process to performing multiple experiments. The researcher compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one, and if the patterns coincide, the results strengthen the study's internal validity. The procedure involves no precise patterns, and in this study, findings from each testimony were compared against the propositions. The researcher's four propositions were based on current scholarly literature and addressed the following areas: effects of curricular mandates evident in classrooms; teachers' authority to make curricular choices; teachers' reliance on conventional (e.g., textbooks, standardized tests) curricular resources; and rationales for teaching lessons containing local content vis-à-vis mandated standardized content.

Participants

Five middle and high school teachers participated in this study. Beth and Jim[1] taught at the same middle school. Beth taught seventh-grade English and Jim, eighth-grade social studies. Their eastern Kentucky school housed approximately 500 students in six grades. Beth and Jim have been teachers in this school for 13 and 5 years, respectively. The remaining participants, Shane, Liz, and Cat, were all science teachers in 3 separate eastern Kentucky school districts, each district containing a single high school. Shane's school housed approximately 850 students. While Shane has taught biology and environmental science to high school students for 12 years, Liz and Cat are both relatively new teachers. Liz has taught high school earth science for 1 year in a county in which more than 75 percent of the revenue is generated by agriculture. Cat has taught math and science to seventh graders for fewer than three years.

These teachers had expressed a personal commitment to (and in one case, an appreciation for) efforts to teach students about their milieu. A variety of projects in their classrooms has made the students' milieu a focus of instruction. Shane regularly held his environmental studies class in an award-winning outdoor classroom. Liz and Kat each involved students in a study of local waterways and native aquatic life. Beth sent students to interview family members for an oral history project. For his part, Jim pointed out other teachers as exemplars of teaching about place, teachers who had devised a pen pal assignment. By communicating with students in another part of the state, teachers at both mail-stops emphasized Kentucky's varying geographic regions. The five participants in this study each found local studies to be a supplement to the required curriculum.

[1] According to an agreement with participants, all references to places, persons, and specific local occurrences in this study have been given pseudonyms.

Results

Changes in teachers' instructional planning resulting from curricular mandates

All participants had perceived changes that resulted from the state's standardized curriculum, changes that proved both promising and a concern for teachers and their students. The participants noted changes that ranged from personal teaching efficacy to awarenesses the teacher had about the students she was receiving from the previous grade level. All changes were rooted in student performance.

Participants referred to state and national academic standards during their planning. Shane alone mentioned utilizing national standards. National science standards acted "as a back up" to verify his instructional choices.

Regarding state standards, Beth and Jim both began their planning with Kentucky's list of the core content, the standards tested on the state exams. Beth would review the English standards listed on the state department of education website, then search for materials to match the content of the standards. Jim and his social studies colleagues from a number of grade levels had sat together to align the curriculum, assigning particular content standards to be taught in each grade. As a result, Jim knew what content was to be addressed at each grade level and what content he was responsible for teaching. He felt confidence in starting with the core content specifically because it told teachers what content would be on the state test.

Participants in this study noted shifting roles for teacher and students under the state's requirements for accountability – the teacher was transforming into a guide, with students experiencing increased options about how they would do their learning. Cat said, "I like the way teaching has gone from being strictly lecture to where you can just walk around the room and see things going on." Liz said, "[Students] are moving around. They have taken charge of their own

learning to a certain extent with some direction." Liz also pointed out that as a result of KERA's modifications, she has special-needs students in her classroom whom she might not have taught during previous years. She said, "I guess at one point those kids were pretty much isolated, or it was felt their needs could be met in the resource room rather than mixed with the general population."

Jim and Beth, two middle school teachers from the same district, expressed surprise that their students lacked basic knowledge – such as correct spelling rules – when arriving in their middle-grade classrooms. As a result of the state standards, Jim said, "I think you kind of leave out important things that you really ought not to leave out, but don't focus on some of the important things that you need to, basic skills, maybe." He cited students' inability to locate states on a map of the US and to name their capitals as information he was surprised that students did not have when they entered eighth grade. Beth noted a similar effect that she linked to the state's writing test. She reported, "I see kids who don't spell as well, who don't use grammar. Sentence structure, diagramming sentences, knowing the parts of speech are not as important anymore as getting your ideas down."

In science, Shane pointed out that a mismatch between what the state's standards required and the types of skills that were needed in the *real world* resulted in limiting students' abilities. He accused the state's emphasis on technology (e.g., having students use calculators regularly) of creating a "handicap" for many students. He said,

> Technology's a great thing if you've got basic skills and you can use technology also. Then you're a very powerful person in that way. But if you don't have your basic skills, what happens when

> your computer's down, or what happens when your calculator is not working . . . ?

Shane described teen-aged cashiers in fast-food restaurants who were unable to calculate mentally the amount of change owed a customer. He says, "[T]he people that are behind the technology still need their basic skills to be using the technology effectively."

Jim also noted that KERA had prompted at least one school to curtail its instruction in basic subjects. He described an elementary school foregoing math instruction in fourth grade because math was not tested in that grade. However, math instruction resumed during fifth grade when math was tested on the state exam. Such occurrences have been documented in other settings for other subjects (Breen, 2004) and have become increasingly common in schools that must give standardized tests. Any teacher planning her instruction would find it challenging to receive students who bring to class year-long gaps in their basic learning.

As a result of their planning place-based assignments, each of these teachers noted natural opportunities for building interdisciplinary connections with these assignments. Beth and Liz in particular each reported that they sought cross-curricular collaboration with teachers in Social Studies to develop their place-based assignments, but both cited a similar roadblock – the pacing guide for the other discipline teachers prevented them from collaborating. The broad topic that the place-based assignment was intended to illuminate fell elsewhere in the Social Studies instructional schedule, a complication which Liz and Beth each believed caused the Social Studies teachers to resist invitations to collaborate.

Authority to make curricular choices

A second strand in this study explored the authority each teacher felt in making curricular choices for his/her classroom. Based on a reading of the literature, the researcher proposed that

participants would feel authorized to make curricular choices that allow them to teach content of their choosing either in addition to or in spite of state standards. As the literature suggested, the state standards have proven broad enough to provide guidance for teachers and to eliminate a "guessing game" for teachers' planning. Kentucky's designated core content (the standards tested on the state exams) and students' exam scores were guideposts to which these teachers paid attention.

However, participants claimed that the core content did not perform the job completely. These teachers tended to feel compelled to teach their students information beyond the core curriculum. To that end, they believed that the core content provided enough breadth for them to "localize" key concepts with place-based examples. For instance, all participants indicated that they included *hands-on* activities in their lessons to teach the core curriculum.

Shane pointed out that limiting biology instruction to only the items listed on the state curriculum would mean that he was leaving out many important biological concepts. Therefore, he exposed his students to a number of commercially produced curricula, a liberty he felt comfortable in taking as long as he satisfied his obligation to teach Kentucky's required curriculum. Shane said that providing this "ongoing mix of different curricula" prepared students to face a changing world as well as the high standards of college biology classes. Because no textbook addressed economic and environmental issues in eastern Kentucky, Shane expressed an additional obligation to teach his students about local issues. He said,

> [S]o there's the battle. You teach a certain amount of stuff that kids need for everyday living, especially if they choose to live here, so maybe they don't have to leave home, they may want to stay here. But then you've got to give them the tools to succeed

> somewhere else. And that's the challenge. Where is the medium? Where's the balance? I don't know if there's an answer to that. But for me it's just to teach the kids about their roots, where they're from, the issues that they have to deal with. And, of course, bring in core content within that.

Jim also recognized the significance of adding value to his social studies content by emphasizing the relevance the content has to students' lives. Jim termed this "making it more real to them and less factual." He said, "It's no problem to throw the facts out there, but how do the facts affect [a student's] life?" Jim found that emphasizing the relevance of the course content proved more important to students acquiring new information than did simply telling students, "This information will be on the test."

In their disparate middle schools, Cat and Beth both recognized a duty to meet students' needs. Within the state's requirements, both teachers expressed a willingness to try a number of different approaches to engage their students with the required content. Cat said, "If you find something on the Internet or have something you want to use, you figure out which [approaches] work and which ones don't." Beth described her students as the definitive judges of the effectiveness of an instructional approach. She said, "If it's something that they are bored with and I can see that they are bored with it, we won't finish it just because we have to. We will try something else."

As a first-year teacher, Liz used her colleagues' syllabi to guide her planning. Utilizing resources created by her department-mates assured her that in her science classes she would move toward consistency with what topics were being taught down the hall. However, she cautioned that a syllabus provided little detail to guide teaching. She said, "You're just looking at

a title -- ‘Solar System’ – and you don’t know how much of, what part of, or how in-depth [the material is being taught].” Liz’s perception emphasized the benefit of regular conversations among departmental colleagues to discern the depth to which teachers are covering material as one component of curricular authority.

Reliance on conventional resources

In addition to the list of state standards, all the participants used some form of conventional materials (e.g., textbooks, standardized tests, curriculum guides) during their instructional planning. Not surprisingly, participants supplemented the conventional materials they selected with materials of their own. The conventional resources, each created outside the classroom, proved to be functional materials that could be adapted by these teachers to teach lessons about the milieu.

For Cat, employing local examples aided her in “selling” particular content to students in science class. She believed that local examples were not only a dependable way to pique their interest, but also a validation that the information was in fact something that students should pay attention to. Cat said, “I try to bring in outside activities so they know I’m not just teaching them to the core content. I say, ‘You’re going to use this in the real world.’”

Participants regarded textbooks as non-essential resources, or supplementary at best. While Shane noted that many newer science textbooks address the Kentucky core content, Beth found her Language Arts textbook to be an unreliable tool, despite its alignment with the state standards. She said that students often did not find textbook stories to be engaging. She added,

> If the kids don’t enjoy the story, I don’t think they are going to get the standard. So I pick and choose very carefully which stories we are going to read and I do that based on [selections students have

> enjoyed in] the past . . . . I don't think kids today are book readers. They are not interested in textbooks and you just about have to do a song and dance to keep their interest. Simply opening the textbook and reading and discussing the story, even though it may cover all the different standards, it's not going to teach them those standards. I mean you would have a few kids that would learn anyway who would probably be able to take that textbook and learn everything without you teaching it, but the others wouldn't.

Beth "reads" her students to gauge their level of interest, and cultivates student engagement to increase the chances that students will learn standardized material.

For Jim, as well, social studies textbooks offered limited utility. He said,

> I'll start with textbooks. I don't use them a lot. I don't think they are very user-friendly. The students obviously don't enjoy grabbing a textbook and doing work in the textbook, so you have to use it for reading or emphasis or facts. Basically I use it as a timeline for myself. I know [a particular topic] has to be covered.

Jim also uses sparingly the supplementary materials that accompany textbooks. In particular he finds the textbook's tests "unrealistic" and "ambiguous."

Whenever possible in her science classroom, Liz avoided textbooks, tools that she believed failed to inspire student learning. While she believed textbooks could provide sufficient background information to students, Liz's planning was not limited to using the textbook. She said, "I think there are some days you have to get out of the book, you have to do something different to try to keep things a little bit fresh."

After only one year as a full-time science teacher, Liz's planning displayed some of the multiple challenges that new teachers face, issues that often dissipate as faculty members gain seniority and experience. Liz found that her ten-year-old textbooks were not up-to-date in various science topics. Also, these textbooks were insufficient for the range of reading levels among her students who would need to utilize the text. In addition, her classroom, a make-shift space not specifically designed for science instruction, did not provide a hazard-free setting (with exhaust fans, sinks, adequate work space, and so forth) in which students could perform experiments. This fact prohibited Liz from assigning labs and doing demonstrations that other science students in the school had the opportunity to experience. An observer would suppose that as Liz acquired seniority among the science faculty, she would earn the privilege to have a better equipped classroom for teaching science, and that would, in turn, alter her planning and instruction.

The place-based assignments brought particular resources into prominence in the teachers' classrooms. For example, Liz noted that for her discussion about the health of local streams and rivers, she had students use topographic maps and WebQuests. Interestingly, however, the four teachers who had conducted place-based lessons in their classrooms (all except Jim) all discussed an interactive element that their lessons included to extend students' understanding about the course content. Shane, Liz, and Kat invited experts to their science classes, community professionals and university professors. Beth, having directed her students to conduct historical interviews with family members, herself sat for a group interview – a guinea pig for as students developed their applied interview skills. Considered alongside the cross-cultural connections that Liz and Beth each sought with their social studies departments,

these socializing aspects of the place-based lessons further distinguish this instruction from assignments employing traditional instructional resources.

Rationales for teaching local lessons amongst mandated topics

This research sought to illuminate teachers' selection of local content in an educational climate dominated by standardized testing. The participants in this study identified a surprising range of rationales for planning place-based lessons. These rationales can be classified loosely under the following two headings: place-based lessons as a resource to communicate issues about human identity; and place-based topics as a catalyst to encourage students to learn standardized content.

Some participants perceived local content as a means to address universal issues. For Beth and Liz, local topics served as an avenue by which teachers could instill pride in students (an especially relevant subject in Appalachia with its distinctive regional identity). Beth believed that schools should have one part in teaching about local heritage (in the past, she had led students in an oral history project), a first step in addressing issues of student pride. In the farming community where Liz taught, she detected a low morale among students. She attributed this attitude to students' perception that an agricultural community was somehow out of step with the wider world. Liz said, "Part of the school culture just seemed like, 'We are real rural. We are just farmers. We are not as good as everybody else because we farm,' you know, that sort of thing." Liz made it her mission to communicate to students the cultural significance of their community. She told her students, "Farming adds culture. We don't eat without you."

In his social studies classroom, Jim believed placing local issues at the center of instruction could portray the universality of the human condition. He purported that schools should be situated at the heart of a community, and teachers should promote student involvement

in the community. Jim said, “Community lessons can demonstrate the interconnectedness of the world, how things elsewhere are similar to things here.”

From his perspective as a science educator, Shane believed teachers possessed a broader duty. He advocated teaching local topics to equip students to take action in the community. He said, “I don’t think that we can really understand some of the global issues until we understand some of our own issues and how our issues fit into the global picture.” Because all teachers have limited class time, Shane said that teachers nationwide should each be responsible for teaching their students about issues relevant to their own locality. He said, “It’s just common sense that we would want to teach more about our own state and our own environmental issues here than to focus on the spotted owl or the rainforests. All those are important, by all means. But maybe not spend as much time on those.” Shane suggested that broad concepts such as *extinction* could be taught everywhere by using examples of the concept that occur locally. To this end, he believed a nationwide patchwork of teachers offering place-based lessons would produce well-informed students conversant in local incidents of widespread scientific significance.

In addition, two participants promoted the value of place-based lessons for communicating the content’s immediate relevance and motivating students’ academic performance. A staple in Cat’s science classroom was to discuss a local issue’s relevance to students’ futures as a way to offer an immediate rationale for students to pay attention to the lesson before them. In her science classes, Liz drew a connection between the significant environmental problems present in the agricultural community where she taught and the schooling that students had received previously. Liz’s community was struggling with damage to its soil and drinking water, the apparent result of the use of agricultural chemicals and improper disposal of solid wastes on farmland. By inquiring with students about current environmental

threats, Liz saw the opportunity to promote students' individual attention to their own vocations. She said,

> Some of that [damage] is due to the fact that [students'] parents graduated from high school and, for some of them, that's where their education stopped. They've . . . chosen to gain any other knowledge only when it's absolutely necessary and they don't have a real concern about the environment . . . . It kind of was upsetting to think that they didn't realize what was happening as a result of that, what are the consequences of these actions, or that they even have consequences. I guess I was sort of on a soap box, but I felt like they needed to realize that . . . there are consequences to these actions. Everybody shares [the consequences] now.

Liz believed that the students currently in her classroom would become farmers, and schooling could help them farm more efficiently and more safely. By communicating with students about local issues and their connection with the farming profession, Liz recognized the necessity to apply learning to the real world for individuals' personal well-being and, ultimately, the good of the community at large.

Discussion

Regarding students' success in school, the prevailing attitude among participants was that the state's core curriculum was essential yet incomplete at a variety of significant levels. While the pervasive core curriculum spelled out what teachers needed to teach, used alone, participants believed, the core curriculum failed to prepare students to use school knowledge either in higher education or in real life. The participants could easily identify knowledge and basic skills that

were missing from the core content for their respective disciplines. As a result, these teachers chose place-based instruction to enhance the core content.

Participants detected a surprising attitude among students that seemed to define a three-way disconnect between academic content, the real world, and students. Each week a nationally syndicated radio quiz show invites contestants to choose questions from an array of categories, including a category called “Things You Should Have Learned in School Had You Been Paying Attention.” Standardized testing in participants’ schools has yielded a reality that mirrors the quiz show. According to the participants, content is being taught for which students can perceive little value beyond the taking of the test. The writers for the quiz show have figured it out, and so have students. Many students express a skepticism toward academic content which teachers must overcome, what Jim termed making the content “more real . . . and less factual.” Without a specific “disclaimer” from teachers that the content being taught will have some value beyond the test, many students prove disengaged from the learning of the content.

If teachers do not prompt the question, it is unlikely that students will independently make connections to classroom content and automatically ask, “How does this course content affect my life? How can I apply academic content to better understand the place in which I live?” In fact, a standardized curriculum causes just the opposite awareness to seem more plausible – that students will witness a greater disconnect between classroom knowledge and their lives outside of school, the result of a focus on standardized curricula, if teachers do not connect academic content to students’ lives.

Conclusions

The results of this study echo the literature which shows that among teachers who employ place-based lessons, the state standards provided useful guidance and a framework to which to attach local lessons. Among other purposes, place-based content provided motivation for students to learn the core content. Jim was impelled, for example, to overcome a perceived automaticity and sterility of standardized materials (textbooks, state tests, etc.) and make the content seem "more real . . . and less factual." Other participants found that they needed to point out what was worthy of and relevant to students' attention by means of place-based examples.

Research has shown that students can perform successfully on standardized tests by addressing state standards through place-based topics, such as local economic or environmental issues. While promoting a connection between classroom lessons and community, teachers can contribute positively to community health, a benefit to a locality's young people. The participants in this study exhibited practices that built upon consistent themes for good instruction. These student-centered practices coupled with faculty-wide collaborations on good instruction are practices that make sense for all teachers, not merely secondary educators in rural classrooms.

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